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Case history

Religion in American Life Launches 'Invite A Friend' Project

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Grass roots program based on survey research

PRINCETON — Religion in American Life (RIAL) recently launched a mammoth campaign, "Invite a Friend," through which it hopes to aid the nation's religious bodies at the local level to increase participation in worship, education and community service by 40 percent. The program was not just a case of creative brainstorming, but was the result of the systematic study of available survey data on the religious attitudes, behavior and impact of the American public.

RIAL is the umbrella organization through which religious groups of all major faiths and traditions work together to increase public awareness of religion. It is the organization that is largely responsible for the ubiquitous listings of local religious services at the nation's hotels, motels and other travel spots, but its major method of religious outreach has been through the sponsorship of public service advertising.

Recently RIAL completed a major re-evaluation of its mission and methods by asking itself four basic questions:

1. What is the current and potential role of religion in American life?
2. What needs in our society can religious participation fulfill?
3. How well is RIAL addressing those needs?
4. How can RIAL address them more effectively in the future?

The role of religion

Drawing upon surveys by Gallup and others, RIAL noted the serious religious commitment by the American public, as demonstrated by findings such as formal religious affiliation by three Americans in five, and weekly attendance at religious services of 110 million members of the public.

Beyond feelings of belonging, sense of purpose and inner peace, however, religion was assumed to play also an important role in the community. It was hypothesized that religious exposure not only inspired people to be better individuals in the conduct of their personal and familial lives, but also led people to be "their brother's keeper" through activities in social, civic and charitable spheres.

Meeting societal needs

It was further noted that Gallup research had found that people with religious affiliations usually are very active in these very activities — social, charitable and civic — through actions such as feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, caring for the sick, educating the young, providing child care and elder care. Indeed, the activity of the churched is three times more than that of those with no formal religious ties. In most communities members of churches and synagogues are the major providers of human services, outspending all corporations and foundations combined by a margin of two to one.

Research gathered from Gallup, the Lilly Endowment, the Independent Sector, and other groups showed that Americans who worship together generally are more likely to reject drugs, to demonstrate literacy, to be more productive in the workplace, and to show commitment to children and family life at levels well above the national average. Equally important, they contribute more than $19 billion annually to other-than-religious human services. This is more than twice the amount contributed by all corporations and foundations. In addition, the dollar value of volunteer time members give to community services is estimated to be more than $6.3 billion annually.

RIAL easily concluded that to meet the challenges that face us locally and nationally, more of these people who provide the organized neighborliness that arises from worship and service in the context of organized religion are needed.

(continued on page 2)

(continued from page 1)

Invite a Friend Case History

Preaching to the converted

In analyzing the past record of RIAL's national advertising campaigns on television, radio, in magazines and newspapers, and outdoor advertising, it was estimated that through TV alone 680 million "impressions" were being made annually.

When the RIAL trustees and staff, however, took a hard, objective look at the results of this activity, it became apparent that although the programs probably were effective in helping to sustain the commitment and good works of the churched members of society, the available evidence indicated there was only minimal impact at best upon the unchurched and uncommitted. In other words, "preaching to the already converted" was the primary impact of the program. To be sure, some individual denominations had been successful in recruiting new members and bringing old members back to the fold, but in national terms, the growth curve of overall membership, attendance and religious participation, if not declining, was flat. New directions were needed.

Invite a friend

In evaluating the above, the conclusions appeared to be clear:

1. Religion plays a role in most people's lives, but many of the unchurched currently do not have the means to channel their need for group worship or community service.
2. The current impact of church membership upon society is highly positive. Expansion of church membership should result in increased dividends to the well being of American society.
3. A program is needed to build upon current church membership to attract new members and to expand the role of the church's service to the community.

Nicholas B. VanDyck, President and CEO of RIAL, combined the quantitative results with informal case study interviews he had been conducting with church leaders, which showed in case after case that the most successful efforts at increasing attendance and membership came through the personal intervention of individuals. Specifically, 86% of people who became involved in the life of a religious organization probably had done so because a relative or friend asked them to do so. This indicated that the project's advertising should be aimed at current members to encourage them to "invite a friend" (or two, or more) to participate in worship and community service.

To assist congregations and to help them to better serve the needs of individuals and communities an introduction package — including an "Action Guide" outlining ways in which groups can enlist and train volunteers — is being distributed to members and clergy in denominations and dioceses that account for more than 56 million Americans who are potential volunteers. Versions of the introductory package, tailored to the particular needs and styles of each family of faith, are being distributed through denominational or diocesan publications.

Information concerning the "Invite a Friend" project is available by calling the toll-free number, 1-800-638-3463. Callers will be sent an Action Guide and referred to contact persons in participating denominations for outreach or evangelism materials appropriate to their family of faith.

"in case after case . . . the most successful efforts at increasing membership and attendance came through the personal intervention of individuals."

Ministers Rated Highly As Community Advice and Information Sources

Local ministers often are rated highly as important sources of information and advice in comparison to other professionals in their local communities. Physicians are at the top of the list by merit, having received 84% positive ratings from the populace. Seven persons in 10 rate pharmacists (71%) and ministers (70%) as important information and advice sources. Less frequently rated as important are lawyers (60%), bankers (55%), and librarians (40%).

Women more often than men nominated ministers as important sources, by a margin of 77% to 63%. Higher-than-average ratings also were given to ministers by residents of the South (78%) and by people over 50 years of age (74%). Correspondingly, they also received higher-than-average ratings from non-high school graduates (75%) and people with low incomes (75%). People living in the West (62%) were least inclined to rate their local ministers as important advice and information sources.

The ratings were obtained in answer to the following question:

In any community there are certain types of people you can go to for information or advice. I would like your opinion concerning the importance of having these people available as sources of advice, regardless of whether or not you personally use them for advice. As I name each type of person, please rate how important that person is on a scale of "1" to "5," if "1" means very important and "5" means not at all important.

The study was conducted by The Gallup Organization for the National Association of Chain Drug Stores. Telephone interviews were conducted among a nationwide sample of 1,012 adults, ages 18 and older, during the period of February 12-19, 1990.

People Considered Important Sources of Advice

(Percent rating each type as "important")

Doctors	84%
Pharmacists	71
Ministers	70
Lawyers	60
Bankers	55
Librarians	40

People Ranking Ministers Highly

National	70%
Gender	
Male	63
Female	77
Age	
18-30	69
31-49	69
50 and older	74
Education	
Non-high school graduate	75
High school graduate	70
Attended college	68
Income	
Under $25,000	75
$25,000-$39,999	67
$40,000 and over	68
Region	
East	67
Midwest	70
South	78
West	62

The second in a three-part series

Episcopalian Members Beliefs Often Are Highly Symbolic and Personal

Episcopalians appear to practice their religion symbolically and by example, but less often show such Protestant traits as Bible study, active evangelizing, or conversion experiences. Over nine Episcopalians in 10 (93%), for example, believe God calls them to be a minister to others at home, place of work, and community; but, comparatively fewer (37%) report vigorous activity in attempting to bring others to Christ through their actions, discussion, or prayer. About one member in four (27%) frequently invites others to attend church.

Religion is considered very important by 79% of Episcopalian church members, including 49% who say it is the most important aspect of their lives. While important to many, just 48% say they frequently discuss religion with their family or friends.

Eight Episcopalians in 10 (79%) say they always or frequently attend worship services, and seven in 10 believe in attending Holy Eucharist at least once a week (71%) and in praying daily at specific times such as before meals or before going to bed (70%). Over half (55%) strongly agree that they seek God's will through prayer. But only 18% say with equal conviction "that I do things I don't want to do because I believe it is the will of God."

Less than half of the members (45%) say they would characterize themselves as being greatly active in the church and in its activities. Only about one Episcopalian member in three frequently reads the Bible or other religious literature (36%), or takes part in a Bible study or prayer group or in special ministries (31%). Even so, four in 10 (41%) appear to place complete faith in the full authority of the Bible.

Members often report that they receive comfort and support from their religious beliefs (68%), and 63% avidly wish their religious beliefs were stronger. Fewer, however, show similar interest in strengthening their relationships with other Christians (42%), or say that they have ever had a religious experience that greatly changed the direction of their lives (42%).

One-fifth of Episcopalian members report that they tithe; that is, give 10% or more of their income to the church. An additional 31% give 5% to 9% of their income, while 35% estimate their annual church donations as under 5%.

These findings are based upon a study conducted for the Episcopal Church by The Gallup Organization, and entitled, *The Spiritual Health of the Episcopal Church*. Information about obtaining copies of the summary or complete survey report is available from Episcopal Parish Services, Dept. 9040, Washington, DC 20061-9040.

Basic Practices of Episcopalian Church Members

Believe God calls me to be a minister to others in my home, place of work, and community	93%
Strongly agree that I try to bring others to Christ, through the way I live or through discussion or prayer	37
Consider religion very important in own life	79
Receive comfort and support from my religious beliefs	68
Consider religious faith most important aspect in my life	49
Greatly active and involved in church and its activities	45
Have had a religious experience that greatly changed the direction of my life	42
Always or frequently...	
Attend worship services	79
Pray at specific times such as before meals or before going to bed	70
Read the Bible	36
Read other religious literature	36
Take part in prayer group, Bible study group, special ministry, etc.	31
Tithe (give 10% or more of income to the church)	20

Two Thought-Provoking Books for Summer Reading

Research on religion is the underlying force of two new thought-provoking books that readers may wish to consider taking with them on their summer vacations or assignments.

Awash in a Sea of Faith. Christianizing the American People. *Jon Butler*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1990, $29.50. ISBN 0-674-05600-0. 360pp.

Jon Butler's book provides a "bottom up" view of church development by concentrating on measures of actual behavior of the rank and file of the churched and unchurched colonists and federalists in America. It is an important complement to the traditional histories and interpretations by such scholars as Miller, Wertenbaker, Parrington, and Baltzell, etc., whose writings focussed almost exclusively upon the colonial elite's theological preoccupations.

Contrary to previous images of puritan oligarchies in New England, peaceable Quaker kingdoms in Pennsylvania, tolerant Catholics in Maryland, and Episcopal establishments of the South, Butler paints a far different picture of a largely indifferent laity which showed little inclination to attend services, even on Easter, let alone ponder the finer points of theological disputation that so frequently embroiled their leaders in trans-Atlantic debates. Further, it was a laity which frequently dabbled in magic, astrology and the occult in 17th to 19th Century versions of "New Age" beliefs.

These findings are not "revisionism" in which Butler tries to rewrite history, but instead are the meticulous and imaginative scholarly use of existing documents to provide pictures of the practices of the rank and file who left no other record of their thoughts behind. He chronicles the lack of interest of later emigres in joining the elect community of saints in New England, the devastating impact of schisms in Quakerdom, the inability of Lord Baltimore to attract an affluent English Catholic gentry that saw no reason to move to the wilds of America, and a Virginia populated largely by males in their twenties — who no different from their counterparts in any other era — showed scant interest in church affairs.

Butler then demonstrates that the development of Christianity in America probably owed more to the organizational abilities and fervor of evangelizing Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians than to "Awakenings," which he views largely as scholarly artifacts.

This is not a book to make people feel smug or comfortable. Butler shows no hesitancy to drag up embarrassing dealings by early American church leaders in the occult and mystical. He also discusses in detail the conduct and use of the church in the South in its "African spiritual holocaust" and the subsequent effort by Blacks to form their own Christian churches.

Fifty-one pages of notes detail the multitude of historical sources used by Butler to develop the information and interpretations, as well as providing an introduction to the writings of the current generation of cultural historians involved in the studies of religion.

The Catholic Myth. The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics. *Andrew M. Greeley*. Charles Scribener's Sons, New York, 1990, $21.95. ISBN 0-684-19184-9. 322pp.

Andrew Greeley presents the methods of the sociologist in this work to demonstrate conclusively that persistent images of American Catholics as low-income, blue-collar, recent emigres are patently false. Such an interpretation will hardly be surprising to readers of **Emerging Trends**, but many will find great interest instead in how he presents his findings and the implications he believes they have.

Greeley provides the reader with a rare behind-the-scenes look of how the social researcher uses survey data to test hypotheses, discover new relationships, and challenge the assumptions of conventional wisdom. He conveys the excitement of discovery and vindication of assumptions through multivariate statistical analysis, but also the chagrin of being challenged successfully by an undergraduate who offers fresh insight and solutions to a problem that baffled the more erudite.

He takes to task "pop" journalists and TV talkshow hosts, the Catholic hierarchy and the leadership of the Democratic Party for failing to recognize the demographic realities of American Catholics, with disastrous results as policies based upon these misplaced images lead to lost commitments, declining church revenues, and landslide victories for the G.O.P.

The book provides a thorough review of some of the most important surveys conducted among Catholics in the past 20 years, but Greeley also draws upon such diverse sources as examples from his own fictional writing and a content analysis of "Madonna's" rock video "Like a Prayer" in an attempt to link the findings of sociological research with the poetry and mystery of the Catholic faithful. From this analysis he derives what can only be assumed to be highly controversial views on such topics as the celibacy of the priesthood, sexuality and the Gospel, feminism and God, birth control and the Vatican, and the persistence of belief by American Catholics despite the distractions all too often imposed upon them by pope, bishop and parish priest.

—Robert Bezilla

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